**Health system crushed by overweight**

SHABNAM DASTGHEIB AND STACEY KIRK

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A morbidly obese teenager weighing 270kg was crushed and killed by the weight of his own body in the intensive care unit.

A 210kg 20-year-old unconscious after a night of drinking, dead from a mixture of his size and the booze.

A 120kg woman in her 30s admitted with respiratory failure, septic shock and in need of renal dialysis.

New Zealand's hospitals are full of these tragic, preventable tales and experts say they are at a loss as to how to deal with patients who are just too large for the equipment and cannot be examined or treated. Whatever is wrong with them is lost under layers of excess fat.

Health experts say a lack of government vision and investment means the obesity epidemic is continuing to balloon out of control with no end in sight.

Middlemore Hospital intensive care specialist David Galler said much of his time was now spent dealing with preventable issues which stemmed from obesity. His job did not start out this way.

"There are lots of people walking around this nation and their size isn't compatible with life. Some people are so big now that we can't actually diagnose what's wrong with them. We can only do so much, I can't turn the world backwards and make a person who is 270kg, 100kg."

According to the most recent New Zealand Health Survey, 1.2 million New Zealanders are now obese, more than was recorded in the 2012 report. This translates to three in 10 adults and one in nine children.

These rates are significantly higher in poorer areas. Two-thirds of adults and one-third of children are classed as overweight. Galler blamed a lack of leadership and vision at a government level and said obesity was now a bigger health concern than smoking.

"We can keep on putting these things off but we need regulation from the government's end. It's an immensely expensive problem for us when we think about obesity being one of the major triggers of type 2 diabetes."

Galler's view is backed up by Auckland University professor Boyd Swinburn, who says there is no doubt New Zealand is getting increasingly fatter at an alarming rate.

"We spend $700m a year on obesity through diabetes and heart disease. It's been going up since the 1980s. To be honest, not much has happened in the last few decades in the way of policy and in the last five or six years there has been very little done."

Galler said the country was being sold short because of a lack of vision from politicians. "New Zealand kids are fatter than any European kids, we are way behind the United States and Australia.

"For politicians there is no promise of immediate gain. Health spending is going through the roof and there are all sorts of reasons for that ... the management of chronic disease is a major factor. It's our fear of preventing the preventable. We need a much more sophisticated system to prevent disease and keep people well."

The Morgan Foundation states a 20 per cent tax on soft drinks could save 67 lives per year. The money raised could be used to promote healthy eating and awareness campaigns. The foundation said the government had rejected this plan even though costs to the health system from obesity were pushing $700m.

The Ministry of Health said it didn't hold data on the cost of obesity to the health system.

A spokesperson said there were a number of actions under way to tackle obesity including increased funding in the Budget. There is $40 million earmarked over four years for Healthy Families, an initiative focused on encouraging families to make good food choices, be active, sustain a healthy weight, not smoke and drink only in moderation.

The same approach had been successful in other parts of the world, including Victoria, Australia.

Obesity campaigner Dr Robyn Toomath was not optimistic about the Healthy Families initiative as she said it was not a unique enough approach to New Zealand.

"The sorts of things that shape the environment, the health sector has no ability to influence. We haven't had any of that over the last six years, we have basically had a formal declaration that they are going to be hands off and give an absolute free rein.

"Extremely motivated people try extremely hard to change their weight and fail. Once people are obese it's extremely difficult to lose weight."

She said claims that the statistics were not as bad as they looked and that certain cultures needed different measures were just red herrings.

"We know that Pacific Island people can carry a bit more weight than Europeans and Asians without developing issues. But we also know that rampant obesity and morbid obesity is a significant problem for Pacific Islanders."

SOLUTION IS TO FOCUS ON CHILDHOOD

With 33 per cent of New Zealand children now considered overweight, New Zealand "cannot be proud of where it stands" on childhood obesity, says the prime minister's chief science adviser.

Sir Peter Gluckman, who has an extensive background in paediatrics, has been selected to co-chair a World Health Organisation commission looking into childhood obesity globally. He said he hoped the commission's findings would be given special weight in New Zealand.

Ministry of Health figures now showed 11 per cent of children in New Zealand are obese, and 22 per cent overweight. Speaking to the Sunday Star-Times from the WHO general assembly in Switzerland, Gluckman said there was "no silver bullet" to reducing obesity rates.

"It's actually very complex, there are biological factors involved, behavioural factors which include biological determinants and then there's the context of this rich world of food we live in.

"These problems start before you're born and continue to escalate, but dissecting out when to get best bang for your buck is actually quite hard."

Gluckman said there were, however, "hints" toward effective strategies. The Government was already preparing to move on those hints, dedicating $40 million in the recent Budget to a programme encouraging families to live healthier, more active lives.

Healthy Families NZ is based on a similar programme causing much excitement in Victoria, Australia. Children in Colac, southwest of Melbourne, were on average 1kg lighter than those in neighbouring towns. Their waists were 3cm smaller and the children could also run faster and had lower body mass index scores.

Project Energise, funded by Waikato DHB, has provided similar results since 2005, for 44,000 primary and intermediate schoolchildren across 244 Waikato schools.

Obesity rates among those children were 3 per cent lower than the national average, children weighed less and had a lower body mass index than Waikato children of the same age measured in 2004 and 2006. They could also now run 20s faster over 500m compared with children from the same age groups between 2001 and 2007.

Healthy Families NZ would be rolled out nationwide, but special "communities" would be established in 10 high-risk areas for preventable chronic diseases.

Gluckman said that while New Zealand didn't stand out as being any worse than other countries, the problem here was compounded by higher numbers of Maori and Polynesians who were particularly at risk.

"But we can't be proud of where we stand, no western country of where they stand, no Pacific Island can be proud of where it stands, and so we have a real problem. Let's not kid ourselves, that these issues are progressive issues which governments want to address, I think."

While Healthy Families NZ was a more holistic approach to the issue, the results would not be quick in coming. There has been a vocal cry from some groups for a tax on fizzy drinks. Health Minister Tony Ryall has emphatically ruled out such levies, saying they didn't work and placed unnecessary financial burden on the most vulnerable.

Part of the evidence Gluckman and his team of WHO researchers would be analysing however, was the advertising of such drinks and junk to children.

"I think what is new, and really important, is up to now the focus has always been on the adult, and now we're seeing an increasing recognition that obesity starts in childhood, starts perhaps before childhood and that's where we need to focus," he said.

"I think it's fair to say that New Zealand has a real challenge - we know that we have a high rate, we know that Maori and Pacific people are at particular risk, we therefore have a real obligation to address it, like we've been addressing tobacco."

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